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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the role of physical activity in helping young children to attain desired objectives, educators should continually be investigating avenues for involving children in daily physical activity. This paper presents the Active Living approach, a uniquely Canadian experience that encourages young children to be physically active every day. This mission of Active Living is to support, facilitate, and promote the mobilization of adults to help young children participate in, enjoy, and value physical activity. The paper describes the application of the Canadian Active Living movement to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and outlines benefits of physical activity. Also presented are principles related to physical activity as it pertains to young children, including the importance of focusing on the whole child, respecting growth patterns, providing equal opportunities for physical activity, providing a variety of choices, and keeping activities fun and non-threatening. Common myths impeding participation in physical activity are listed, including gender stereotypes, the role of structured activities, the impact of disabilities, and the use of expensive playground equipment. Sample activities promoting active play for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are presented. The paper concludes by noting that identifying ways to use a child's imagination to create activities is a foundation of the active living approach. (Contains 13 references.) (KB)

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The Active Living Approach: A Canadian Perspective for Physically Active Young Children

by

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the role that physical activity has in assisting young children attain desired objectives, adults should continually be investigating avenues for involving children in daily physical activity. Educators should be aware that for the child, movement is one of the most utilized vehicles of non-veral interaction and expression. All children enjoy physical activity. Playing makes a child happy.

The Active Living approach is a uniquely Canadian experience that encourages young children to be physically active everyday. The mission for the promotion of active living young children can be best enunciated as follows: to support, to facilitate, and to promote the mobilization of adults to help young children participate in, enjoy and value physical activity.

The presentation is designed to afford conferees an overview of the Canadian Active Living approach to physical activity for young children. Furthermore, this presentation will present a framework for educators to support an active lifestyle among young children. Various activities will be described to promote active play for young children and all its associated benefits.

Physical activity is one of the most important mediums through which young children form impressions about themselves as well as about their surroundings. Physical activity exerts a positive relationship on good health, happiness, and vitality. In the context of the preceding statements, the concept of Active Living is a lifestyle in which physical activity is valued and integrated into daily life. For very young children, there is a wide range in the level of physical abilities, hence, activities/exercises should be age specific for each child. Early childhood educators should concentrate on each child's actions rather than the outcome. Rather than telling a child what to do or doing the activity for him/her, allow the preschooler to utilize his/her imagination to conceive simple games and activities.

Active living goals affords infants, toddlers, and preschoolers daily experiences with active play/physical activity. Furthermore, childcare centres who promote the active living concept understand that play for young children is associated with human development. Hence, early childhood educators must offer challenges which are both age and stage appropriate. For young children to advance along the chain of development, challenges must be presented through variety. Furthermore, an increasing series of challenges go hand-in-hand with developmental characteristics. For example, bright colors, smells and sounds generate interest in children's play; as well a variety of toys and equipment can enhance the development of the senses so important in play exercises.

THE ACTIVE LIVING APPROACH: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE FOR PHYSICALLY ACTIVE YOUNG CHILDREN

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"Since 1986, the concept of active living has been developed to define the relationship between physical activity, well-being and quality of life"(9). Active living is an approach that encourages Canadians to be active everyday. The National Children and Youth Fitness Office (11) defines active living as: "Choosing a balanced way of living that includes a variety of physical activities within our daily routines and leisure pursuits.' More precisely from an early childhood context:

> When we think of very young children living actively, we see little girls and boys who are eager to explore their world and to move freely through it. Activity satisfies their curiosity and gives them real happiness. Movement is an important part of a child's physical, emotional and mental development (9).

Why are movement experiences worthwhile and indeed necessary? Physical Activity is one of the most important mediums through which young children form impressions about themselves as well as about their surroundings. Physical activity is accepted as having a positive relationship with good health, happiness, and vitality.

The strongest practical implication for a wide variety of movement experiences for young children is that it is at this age that basic motor skills are being developed; by age five all the fundamental movement patterns have emerged. Consequently, it becomes evident that young children require ample opportunities to pursue daily physical activities. Furthermore, in an early childhood setting, the onus is on the early childhood educator to ensure that active living is an integral and valuable aspect of a preschooler's life (4).

The Active Living Approach is designed as a framework for action for early childhood educators to support and encourage an active lifestyle among very young children. Consequently, early childhood educators must examine the challenges and opportunities that they provide for young children to begin a life of active living.

What is active living for young children

Active living for young children has strong roots in the Canadian Active Living movement. Its mission for the promotion of active living for very young children can be best enunciated as follows: "To support, facilitate, and promote the mobilization of Canadians to help infants, toddlers, and pre-school children to participate in, enjoy and value physical activity" (10). Because adults perform an essential role in active living opportunities for very young children, the preceding goal is directed toward this group.

The attitudes that young children form towards physical activity often determine their later involvement in active living. Hence, "Positive experiences with active living during these younger years can do much to improve an individual's quality of life" (3). Because early childhood educators play a key role in the educational process, it becomes crucial that they comprehend the values of active living for young children. Listed below are some of the benefits to being an active child:

- ☐ Movement is an important part of a child's physical, mental and emotional development.
- ☐ Activity satisfies a child's curiosity of movement.
- ☐ Good feelings are felt when early childhood educators, parents, and families are involved in physical activity and active play.
- ☐ Activity can make young children feel good about themselves.
- ☐ Games and activity allow for mixing with other children, and develops social skills.
- ☐ Activity develops positive life-long attitudes towards physical activity.
- ☐ Young children solve problems and gain success through challenges and exploration.
- ☐ Regular activity increases a child's level of fitness.
- ☐ Active children have positive, healthy lifestyle practices.
- ☐ Physical activity reduces the risks of heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, and other diseases.
- ☐ As a result of physical activity, young children can deal with stress more effectively.
- ☐ Active children enjoy a higher energy level.
- ☐ Children who are active perform better at mental tasks.
- ☐ Active children have better concentration and discipline and feel good about themselves (3).

It has often been said that a child's environment is his/her developmental workshop. Hence, because young children run, jump, and play in their early childhood setting, the responsibility is on early childhood educators to ensure preschoolers have room to move indoors and out. Older children tend to be boisterous whereas infants are often disturbed by loud noises. Thus, to ensure levels of involvement, infants to preschoolers, a center should allow for choices of individual and group play (3). With choices, a center can be deemed developmental because children can decide their own level of active play.

Active living goals afford infants, toddlers, and preschoolers daily experiences with active play/physical activity. Furthermore, childcare centres who promote the active living concept understand that play for young children is associated with human development. Hence, early childhood educators must offer challenges which are both age and stage appropriate. For young children to advance along the chain of development, challenges must be presented through variety. Furthermore, an increasing series of challenges go hand-in-hand with developmental characteristics. For example, bright colors, smells and sounds generate interest in children's play; as well as a variety of toys and equipment can enhance the development of the senses so important in play experiences (3).

Early childhood educators committed to active living children need to be aware of the following principles:

- ☐ Focus on the whole child, stressing the physical, emotional, social and spiritual value of living actively.
- ☐ At the day care center, provide equal opportunities for physical activity, regardless of age, gender, language, ethnic background, and ability.
- ☐ Promote positive self-image, self-esteem, and personal control. This can be accomplished through such things as developing activities where all children garner some measure of success.
- ☐ Early childhood educators should be knowledgeable about and respect growth patterns; and encourage physical activity at each state. With infants when they commence crawling, they enjoy exploring, hence, with this characteristic in mind create a challenging setting that encourages crawling. Toddlers are often interested in throwing and catching, hence, centres should provide various size balls and bean bags so that this age group can avail of this physical characteristic. Preschoolers begin to refine their abilities to kick and strike. These skills can be encouraged through modified games in small groups with an emphasis on cooperation.
- ☐ Early childhood educators must provide a variety of choices for meaningful activities based on the needs, interests and abilities of young children. For example, one activity for infants could be "crawl with me"; as the child learns to crawl the early childhood educator could guide infants around objects and at the same time encourage the child to crawl under tables, around chairs, and to crawl forward and backward. Preschoolers enjoy active play involving body parts. Because infants, toddlers, and preschoolers progress at their own rate, early childhood educators should never require children to perform, but merely assist in the motor development.
- ☐ Early childhood educators must keep activities fun and non-threatening. This can be accomplished by encouraging physical activity as a choice of play each day. Furthermore, to be effective, active play need not be structured. However, throughout the day early childhood educators need to provide young children with opportunities for active living.

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- ☐ Early childhood educators must encourage a 'for children by children' approach. Movement experiences must be designed so that each child can gain success, thus, the setting and the activities must be presented in an informal manner. Physical activities for young children should be diverse in nature with the caregiver creating a supportive setting in which children can achieve a broad range of motor experiences.
- ☐ Early childhood educators should aim their programs at appropriate age groups within the children target group. Motor development like the other areas of child development is somewhat predictable. For example, infants explore their surroundings through movement and manipulation; hence, they enjoy activities where they are required to attempt fundamental movements of walking, jumping, kicking, catching and throwing. Toddlers and preschoolers prefer active play which emphasizes swinging, sliding, balancing, riding and pulling wheeled toys, water play and climbing; as well they enjoy loosely organized games like 'Simon Says' and hide and seek.
- ☐ Early Childhood Educators must use contemporary, honest, and positive approaches that encourage a sense of belonging. Through the child-centre approach, centres and staff can ensure that movement activities are fun, with ample praise and encouragement, and where young children receive positive feedback. Such a process will enhance a positive attitude towards physical activities (1, 5).

The active living movement challenges early childhood educators and young children to partake in a variety of physical activities/active play daily. To accommodate the preceding goal, early childhood educators need to be cognizant of the following active living myths:

- ☐ Infants, toddlers and preschoolers are naturally active, early childhood educators do not need to be concerned with their level of physical activity. There are many circumstances in the daily lives of very young children that prevent them from being physically active. Hence, caregivers should incorporate a wide range of daily physical activities into their centre's program.
- ☐ Boys play rough and girls play passive. Gender stereotypes towards physical activity contribute to lower fitness levels of girls and perpetuate stereotypical gender behaviors.
- ☐ Structured activities best meet the active living requirement of very young children. For early childhood educators, the best approach is to include activities into their daily routine.
- ☐ Children with chronic conditions and disabilities cannot partake in physical activity. By adapting equipment and the environment early childhood educators can enable disabled preschoolers to lead active lives.
- ☐ Play pens and swings are appropriate for early childhood educators to use as pieces of active living equipment. These are often used as baby sitters and limit the mobility of infants and toddlers.
- ☐ Expensive brand name equipment offer better opportunities for physical activity. Homemade equipment for example, bean bags, wool balls, balance beams, etc. is often better than expensive items in the promotion of active living (3).

Sample activities for the various age groups

For infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, there is a wide range in the level of physical abilities, hence, activities/exercises should be age specific for each child. Early childhood educators should concentrate on each child's actions rather than the outcome. Rather than telling a child what to do or doing the activity for him/her, allow the preschooler to utilize his/her imagination to conceive simple games and activities. (3)

Infants

Children's motor skills develop the instant they are born and continues throughout life. As with older children, movement is critical for the healthy growth of all babies. Infants, as well as toddlers, are more concerned with individual play than group play. Individual play is a time when infants touch, hold, observe, etc. and learn about their own limits. With the preceding factor in mind, early childhood educators should develop certain daily basic exercises.

> Begin with relaxation exercise to establish trust and to ensure that the activities that follow will be relaxed, fun, and worthwhile. Then introduce some stretching and bending exercises to increase flexibility and range of motion. Follow these with 'you-and-me' exercises designed for improving strength endurance, flexibility, and coordination. Talking, laughing, and loving are vital components of each session. (7)

Physical activities for infants can adhere to the motor development stages. Between 0 - 6 months infants focus basically on reaching and grasping, rolling over, sitting, crawling, and standing. The best form of active play for infants in this age category is 'you-and-me' exercises. Listed below are just a few of the physical activities early childhood educators can initiate with infants: leg stretches; hand squeezes; supportive curl ups; toothbrush tickle - light movements performed on particular areas of the foot automatically make the foot move, thus, helping to tone the foot muscles; tummy squeeze - with your whole hand, grasp the stomach gently and feel the baby pulling in his/her tummy; head raises, etc. (7)

During these initial motor development stages, early childhood educators can also focus on simple games such as: peek-boo; kissing - kiss the baby on one hand and then the other, etc.; bubble breaking - encourage the baby to reach and burst the bubbles; singing action games - for example, 'pat-a-cake' and this "piggy went to market', etc. (7, 6)

During the 6 - 12 months category, the motor development stages of infants include: reaching and grasping, sitting, crawling and standing and walking. 'You-and-Me' exercises can also be utilized for this age group. Such activities could include: curl up - assist the child to move from his/her back to a sitting position; stand up - here the early childhood educator assists in raising the baby to a standing position; rowing - the baby sits between the caregivers leg, and both grasp a broom handle and reach forward and backward in a rowing motion, etc. (2, 6).

Simple games that entertain 6 - 12 month babies include: pull and tug - early childhood educators can use a variety of objects like towels; action singing rhymes; mirror game - a floor mirror encourages visual motor activities; and climb about - with rolled up pillows, etc. have the child crawl over objects placed on the floor (2, 6).

The motor development stages of the 12 - 18 month period include: reaching; grasping, releasing and manipulating; sitting; crawling and climbing; and walking. Listed below are a few of the 'you-and-me' exercises for this age group: pedaling - the child lies on his/her back and pedals with the legs; arm circles; helicopter - the child lies on his/her stomach and moves the hands and feet in a kicking motion; and watch me - have the child imitate the adult's actions (2, 6).

Toddlers

The motor development stages for toddlers include: reaching; grasping, releasing, and manipulation; climbing; walking and running; and jumping. The following are several examples of 'you-and-me' exercises for toddlers: wed dog shake - shake arms and legs like a wet dog; flower growing - each child pretends they are a flower growing; helicopter; the tight rope - place a piece of masking tape on the floor and have the child walk along the tape (2, 6).

Active games for toddlers include the following: follow the leader; singing rhymes - for example, wheels on the bus; musical chairs - remember to have a chair for each child; cookie monster tag - this game is a forerunner to tag games, here the adult (cookie monster) chases the child (cookie), then hugs him/her; target games; hide-and-seek; you and me together - for example take a long neighbourhood walk together; etc (2).

Preschoolers

The motor abilities for preschoolers include: reaching, grasping, releasing, and manipulating; climbing; walking and running; jumping and landing; and throwing and catching. As for infants and toddlers, 'you-me-exercises' could also be utilized for this age category.

Recognizing the role exercise has in helping preschoolers attain desired goals, for example, active living children, early childhood educators should be searching for ways to ensure involvement by young children in physical activity. As teachers we need to provide preschoolers with opportunities to partake in physical activity so as to initiate a lifelong concern for active living. If we except the reality of the preceding comment, than as early childhood educators what are our options? Physical activities/active play for preschoolers should be diverse with the early childhood educator creating a supportive setting in which preschoolers can participate in a broad range of physical activities.

For young children, the best approach is to simply include active play into their daily schedules by encouraging such activities as playing outside, taking walks, etc. However, for preschoolers structured play can also be an option to involve children in movement experiences. There are many movement designs early childhood educators could utilize in a child care setting. Outlined below are three designs that educators can easily use in assisting children develop physical skills as well as to promote the active living approach.

The theme approach is one design early childhood educators can utilize when promoting daily physical activities. If this method is to be successful, early childhood educators have to be cognizant of several factors: the activities should focus on large - muscle pursuits, the session must be active and challenging, and explanations must be kept to a minimum. The theme can be as broad as the imagination of the educator (4).

Skill Theme Travel Maps is another approach for teaching physical activities to preschoolers. Skill theme travel maps are viewed as guides for presenting skill development to young children. The skill theme travel map approach progress from the simple, easy to learn activities, to the more advanced. Furthermore, the maps incorporate developmentally appropriate activities for preschoolers premised on the truism that children do not learn skills at the same rate. Skill themes can be divided into three broad categories: locomotor skills (walking, running), non-manipulative skills (turning and balancing) and manipulative skills (kicking, throwing). Movement concepts augment skill themes as they describe how skills are performed. For example, if running is the skill theme, movement concepts such as fast, zig zag, and forward can be used to describe this theme (6).

In today's society young children have few experiences with aerobic activities. This pattern of exercise has traditionally been reserved for adults. However, aerobic play can be used in a preschool environment (5). Aerobics can be best explained to preschoolers as follows: "They are activities that make us huff and puff or breathe hard" (8). Early childhood educators need not concern themselves with the formal approach equated with adult aerobics. The primary goal for young children must be to promote fun and to introduce preschoolers to the habit of regular exercise. Aerobic exercising for young children can follow the same sequence as for adults: warm-up-action song(s); workout - active large-muscle activities; and cool-down-transition time bridging 'active to tranquil play' (5).

Conclusion

Young children often devise their own ideas of how and what they want to play. Furthermore, children in this age group manipulate their milieu in response to their imagination. Also, young children become bored with routine games/rules and enjoy creating their own activities. Hence, identifying ways to utilize a child's imagination to create activities is a foundation to the active living approach.

There are a myriad of benefits to being an active child. Active play contributes to the mental, social and emotional development of young children. Not only does movement enable children to feel good about themselves, but inactivity can contribute to health risks. Researchers

at the University of Memphis studied the impact of diet, exercise, and genetics on weight gain of a group of children between the ages of 3 and 5. One of the significant findings from the study was that children who participated in little exercise were more prone to be overweight by age 5, "--- suggesting that children as young as 3 benefit from increases in physical activities"(12).

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